

Distance Exchange Projects at Elementary School: A Focus on a Co-learning Process

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Abstract. The use of communication and information technology at primary school enables learners to interact at a distance with speakers of the target language. The article aims to show that international distance exchange projects between early-language learners contributes to making a shift in attitudes. The study questions a co-action process based on a reciprocity principle as a social construct.

Keywords: Computer mediated communication, early learning, collaboration, distance exchange projects .

1 Introduction

Before the introduction of technological tools at school, Alziary & Freinet (1947) and later Galisson and Puren (1999), among other researchers, had sceptical views about the capacity of early language learners to deliver consistent exchanges either in their own language or in the target one (ibid. 124). Today, we observe that when they are engaged in distance exchange projects resorting to various computer mediated communication tools, the link and the distance between their own and others' language and culture have to be considered differently (Choffat-Dürr, 2013).

Under the name of distance exchange projects (DEP) we understand that two or more people or groups of people are engaged in a partnership usually for a school year. The purpose is to make native speakers (or speakers of the target language) relate with other language learners in a crossed relation thanks to tools that enable distance interactions.

Our presentation at HCI international 2014 discusses these DEPs as change agents influencing conditions and methods in language teaching and learning at elementary school. It focusses on collaboration for the benefit of first and second language learning in the context of distance exchanges between peers of the same age (8- to 11-year-old learners).

2 Context of the Study

In the UK, the learning of a L2 is not statutory at Key Stage 2, but is tending in that direction (awaited in September 2014), except in Scotland where it is already compul-

sory like in France where learning a foreign language starts at the age of 7 with the aim of reaching level A1, the lowest level in the Common European Reference Framework for Languages (CEFR). According to this standard, at the end of elementary school a learner is expected to be able to:

- Recognise and use familiar words and simple phrases for concrete purposes;
- Introduce himself or someone else;
- Ask and answer basic questions about home, family, surroundings, etc.;
- Communicate in a basic way when the other person speaks slowly and clearly, and is ready to repeat or reformulate to help communication (CEFR, 2001, 24).

To reach this level, the main approach that has been resorted to so far is the communicative approach. However, research in the field of the didactics of languages is critical of it as it is observed in classrooms¹ where, according to theory, the accent should be brought to bear more on the dynamics of social interaction (Audin, 2005). Moreover, as Gaonac'h indicated as early as 1991, "observed practices force us to call into question the artificial character of interactions in a school context" (in French), since, "during language communication activities, systems for communication are indeed set up, but is there really any sense in communicating for communication's sake?" (in French, Bourguignon, 2007). And indeed, despite the principle announced by the CEFR, "While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning" (CEFR, 2001, p.9), we can only observe that it is difficult to create such types of activities within the four walls of the classroom.

In this context however, the European commission through the eTwinning² platform or national institutions encourage school partnerships, to open the class to native speakers. To some extent they share a common consideration in calling for a socially-engaged perspective having classrooms connected to other parts of the world. Even though they are not numerous at elementary level, some teachers, however, answer positively. Showing a converging willingness to promote communicative competences including intercultural components through the medium of communication tools, some get involved into DEPs.

3 Research Question and Hypothesis

Our research questions the activities undertaken by young L2 (second language) learners with a minimal level in the target language (1 to 3 years of learning A1 level) when involved in DEPs. Hence the question: Does resorting to DEPs with young students help their learning process?

¹ The term "class" or "classroom" is used to refer to the body of students that are taught together for a school year.

² eTwinning is an online platform under the supervision of the European Commission. It enables schools across Europe to link online and engage in information and communication technology. It provides online tools such as a "TwinSpace", a safe controlled working environment, and other resources such as ready-made project kits.

More particularly, we suppose that with the influence of information and communication tools, young learners, who were previously excluded from any international correspondence because they could not deliver consistent exchanges, can now communicate. Language which was formerly viewed as a sole written code enabling pen-friends to interact can now be considered in its more universal concept, namely the ability to communicate. Today, ICT offers a great range of tools that allow young students to show their creativity in finding alternative ways to communicate.

Consequently, we aim to identify variables and influences in classrooms where students are linked to speakers of the target language and in particular the communicative contexts in which action takes place. Besides, the importance of the pedagogical context is also under scrutiny, since we assume that it is one of the major factors of the dynamics that may occur. Indeed, the main hypothesis is that resorting to DEPs induces active pedagogy. We suppose that teachers cannot expose their pupils without consulting them on what they expect to do with their distant partners and how they imagine they will go about it. In other words, a socio-constructivist and interactionist approach is at stake. Therefore, the study seeks to show that the learning process is guided by intentions or communicative needs that are created and shared through the dynamics emerging between the two distant groups (reference to activity theory). As a consequence, the tasks or the activities would be central to the social action (Ollivier, 2009). Needless to say that the tools contributing to the action and the co-action process figures among the factors that are to be considered: Which ones are used? On which grounds are they selected? To what purpose? Etc.

4 Method

Our analysis is based on the observation of the activities undertaken for a school year by four partnerships between French and British primary schools. All partnerships were initiated by teachers who were not familiar with distance pedagogy. The data comes from classroom observations (audio and video recordings), interviews and questionnaires from participants in the DEPs. The entire e-mail correspondence between the distant teachers has also been gathered. This collection follows a preliminary survey among 121 French primary school teachers that we conducted to put instructional and pedagogical actions into context.

As Dillenbourg said as early as 2002, we have to keep in mind that this type of studies focussing on “the effectiveness of collaborative learning [to which we include DEPs] depends upon multiple conditions such as group composition (size, age, gender, heterogeneity, ...), task features and communication media” (ibid, 61). Since the conditions are numerous and diverse, and since they interact with each other in a complex way, our study has to be viewed more as case studies that make us enter the process and bring elements that help the understanding of what results from acting collectively at a distance. In particular, it is aimed at identifying some of the common variables that impact the social link (cf. social cognitive learning theory, Vygotsky, 1978) which itself is said to influence L2 learning (Long, 1996 or Warschauer and Meskill, 2000).

Therefore, the activities undertaken as a result of pedagogical choices as well as the type of actions generated by social connections between distant classes are analysed in each DEP (with a focus on the French side). Then a crossed analysis follows. Our grid refers to situated action (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Bandura, 1997) and situated learning theories (Tardif, 1998). Thus, first, we consider the context in which action and co-action take place to interpret them theoretically on social and psychological grounds. We refer to the actors' representations of the project and of the tools viewed to mediate communication. Then, we analyse the material resources that are used to confront them with the L2 learning process (Bange, 1992; Dausendschön-Gay, 2006), and more particularly we explore the link between participation and appropriation.

5 Findings

Among our findings we notice that even when young learners are beginners in the target language, when involved in distance exchange projects, provided they are guided through active pedagogy (which proves to be inherent to this practice), their roles may be enhanced in the context of a joint action. Each of the four projects is grounded on a socio-constructivist paradigm that refers to a situated perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Tardif, 1998). In other words, our hypothesis is confirmed since their activities are guided by intentions and communicative needs that are created through the dynamics emerging between the two distant groups (see examples of their activities below). Learners take into account what their learning environment is and the nature of the relationships that link the two distant groups (Choffat-Dürr and Macaire, 2012).

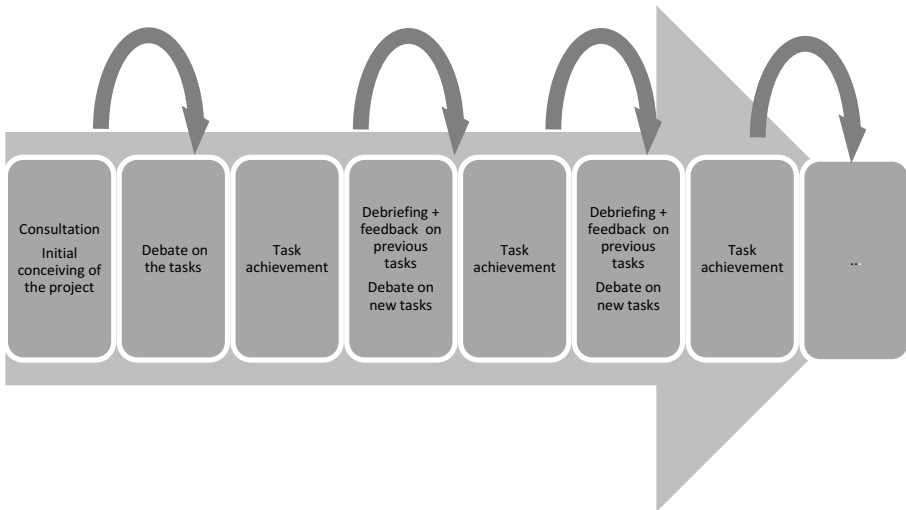


Fig. 1. Cycle based on the teaching method observed in the four partnerships

We observe that in their conceiving of the project, teachers on both sides agree to give an active role to their students. The latter are therefore consulted all along the project. The new pedagogical organisation initiates a new space for learners to engage actively.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with one of the teachers of our cohorts:

From my point of view, this project wouldn't be successful unless the pupils subscribe to it. It means that at the beginning we should explain what a project is without influencing them, without telling them what they have to do. If they agree with the idea and have ideas to develop they have to have enough space to express their goals, their needs (what they have to learn in the foreign language to be able to achieve the task they focus on), what they feel like doing. Then we can build a program from their ideas.

Consultation appears to be the mode adopted to elaborate the different tasks or activities within each class. As for the teachers, they interact as intermediaries between the two groups. However, each group influences the other (cf. the arrows on figure 1). Data collected through interviews at the beginning of the project with the learners show very positive opinions.

I would be pleased if they taught me English and I would teach them my French but we could also help them on other things if we can and I think that they have a beautiful country (in French, Lila, class A/F).

The students' initial aims may be grouped under three entries:

- Communicate to discover the others, their environment
- Engage in mutual teaching of the language and culture
- Play together

Their ambition goes further than the teachers'. First, they envisage the link as a social construct that can be built upon social relationships. They appear to identify themselves with their foreign partners since they perceive that they may have a lot in common starting from their age and their status. Therefore they imagine they can be friends and play together. The distinction also lies in the fact that they take into account that their distant peers are language learners too. Their goal is therefore twofold.

First, they want to communicate with their distant peers to provide them with informative data, input in the target language that can be treated (information about their identity, school and outside school environment, cultural facts, etc.). As an illustration we can refer to French learners who posted photographs of their school environment on the eTwinning platform so as to provide their English peers with an oriented topic of conversation for an approaching videoconference. The English learners therefore worked collectively on questions that the pictures raised. Their project being based on a principle of reciprocity, the latter also took pictures of their school to make a book that they submitted for further online exchanges.

Besides, engaged in a crossed relation, learners perceive that they can also contribute to their partners' language learning by engaging themselves in teaching activities. Following the principles of an implicit contract that would be that each group alternatively helps the other in learning its culture and its language, they opt for collective activities, conducted with the whole class or in smaller groups. They provide various items of input in their first language to be treated by their peers. In one DEP, they went as far as conducting lessons reproducing models that their teachers used for their own learning of the language to teach their partners. For example, they created flashcards to teach lexical items during a videoconference, and then intended to check the impact of their teaching during another online meeting, organizing a bingo game.

Thanks to the tools that are available, they prove creative and develop strategies to reach their aims. As an illustration, we can quote the use of voki.com. It is an online application that is used to create avatars that can be given a voice through various means (via phone, microphone, text to speech or by uploading a file). The students had previously used it as a means to provide themselves with a voice recorder. Yet, unexpectedly, while they were faced with the difficulty to decipher orally scripts that they had written, one student found the text-to-speech option and showed it to his classmates. This tool happened to be relevant to improve pronunciation skills so as to feel sufficiently prepared for oral communication with their distant peers. We witnessed many episodes of such collective dynamics emerging and favouring their learning process. In one PED, we observe that within an institutional context, the project focusing on computer-mediated communication generates "focus on form" not mediated by the teachers but by peers. During asynchronous or synchronous exchanges participants are sensitive to errors that punctuate messages. Their self-questioning concerning the norm in both languages make them collectively produce asynchronous corrective feedback.

The use of the tools responds to active and strategic choices in relation to learners' intentions or needs and their environment, either material or social. As another illustration we can refer to their use of traditional paper correspondence that the four partnerships favour at the beginning of their projects. In a letter accompanied with a drawing, they view a more relevant tool for a first "meeting" as each individual could receive a concrete token. A letter has therefore to be viewed as a tangible objet symbolizing the link. Likewise, in the use of digital video recorders, they see a means for self-assessment when preparing themselves for a videoconference, etc. Whatever the tools used, either for synchronous or asynchronous interaction, we observe that learners primarily seek to use them to strengthen the social link between the distant groups in various directions. They use them to improve their skills, to produce items to be shared and to mediate their interaction.

Their posture appears to favour a metacognitive process and a shift in attitudes leading them to perform in a socio-constructivist context. Not only do they speak the language in a pragmatic way but they also speak about the language, and explore the different means to reach their goals (social, material, organisational, learning, etc.).

Pragmatics is at stake in environments which appear to favour their learning, beyond what is usually at stake with early-language learners.

6 Conclusion

Our findings shed some light on the value of PEDs and more particularly their socio-educational benefits. Grounded on active pedagogy, thanks to which early learners have their words (and world) to say, the representation of the language evolves toward a constructive view of it. As Goffin and al. (2009) say “linguistic questions are charged with affect. The picture that one figure out of a language and of the people who speak it has an undoubtable impact on its learning process” (in French). Young learners are able to perceive the benefit they may draw engaging themselves in a collaborative link abroad, the accent being brought on social interaction phenomenon in a new interschool context. Communication is no longer false or artificial (Gaonac’h, 1991). Its social and learning purposes are embedded in the same dynamics. It means that action is perceived through a more holistic perspective that involves each participant of the collective project. The benefit would therefore go beyond the scope of language teaching at school that is therefore questioned.

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